

# The Outlook

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## LINCOLN AS A LITERARY MAN

By HAMILTON W. MABIE

With Portrait and Facsimiles

## JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL AND HIS FRIENDS

By EDWARD EVERETT HALE

With Thirteen Illustrations

## TORONTO: A MUNICIPAL STUDY

By W. D. GREGORY

With Seven Illustrations



# CAUSE AND EFFECT

IT TOUCHES THE CHEEK  
OF BEAUTY SO GENTLY  
THAT YOUTH LINGERS  
ON THE FACE OF AGE  
AND AGE ITSELF LOOKS YOUTH

Pears' is matchless  
for the complexion



# Lincoln as a Literary Man<sup>1</sup>

By Hamilton W. Mabie

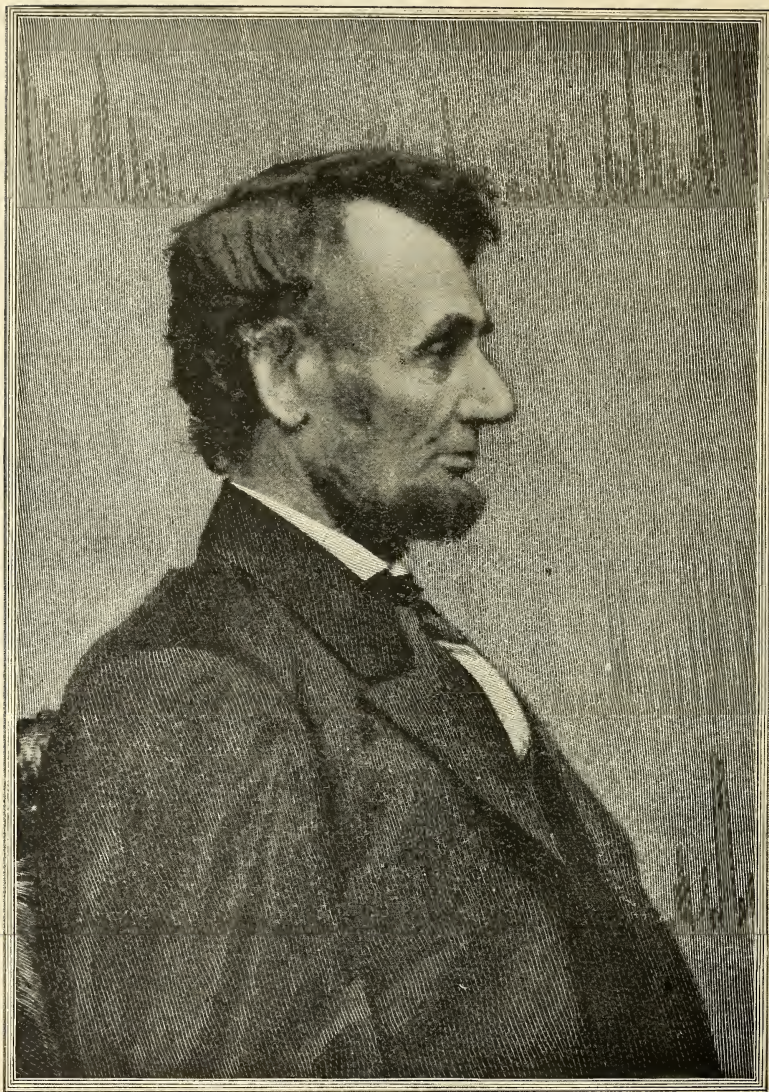
BORN in 1809 and dying in 1865, Mr. Lincoln was the contemporary of every distinguished man of letters in America to the close of the war; but from none of them does he appear to have received literary impulse or guidance. He might have read, if circumstances had been favorable, a large part of the work of Irving, Bryant, Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Lowell, Whittier, Holmes, Longfellow, and Thoreau, as it came from the press; but he was entirely unfamiliar with it, apparently, until late in his career, and it is doubtful if even at that period he knew it well or cared greatly for it. He was singularly isolated by circumstances and by temperament from those influences which usually determine, within certain limits, the quality and character of a man's style.

And Mr. Lincoln had a style—a distinctive, individual, characteristic form of expression. In his own way he gained an insight into the structure of English, and a freedom and skill in the selection and combination of words, which not only made him the most convincing speaker of his time, but which have secured for his speeches a permanent place in literature. One of those speeches is already known wherever the English language is spoken; it is a classic by virtue not only of its unique condensation of the sentiment of a tremendous struggle into the narrow compass of a few brief paragraphs, but by virtue of that instinctive felicity of style which gives to the largest thought the beauty of perfect simplicity. The two Inaugural Addresses are touched by the same deep feeling, the same large vision, the same clear, expressive, and persuasive eloquence; and these qualities are found in a great number of speeches, from Mr. Lincoln's first appearance in public life. In his earliest expressions of his political views there is less range; but there is the structural order, clearness, sense of proportion, ease, and simplicity which give classic quality to the later utterances. Few speeches have so little of what is commonly regarded as oratorical quality; few have approached so

constantly the standards and character of literature. While a group of men of gift and opportunity in the East were giving American literature its earliest direction, and putting the stamp of a high idealism on its thought, and a rare refinement of spirit on its form, this lonely, untrained man on the old frontier was slowly working his way through the hardest and rudest conditions to perhaps the foremost place in American history, and forming at the same time a style of singular and persuasive charm.

There is, however, no possible excellence without adequate education; no possible mastery of any art without thorough training. Mr. Lincoln has sometimes been called an accident, and his literary gift an unaccountable play of nature; but few men have ever more definitely and persistently worked out what was in them by clear intelligence than Mr. Lincoln; and no speaker or writer of our time has, according to his opportunities, trained himself more thoroughly to the use of English prose. Of educational opportunity in the scholastic sense, the future orator had only the slightest. He went to school "by littles," and these "littles" put together aggregated less than a year; but he discerned very early the practical uses of knowledge, and set himself to acquire it. This pursuit soon became a passion, and this deep and irresistible yearning did more for him, perhaps, than richer opportunities would have done. It made him a constant student, and it taught him the value of fragments of time. "He was always at the head of his class," writes one of his schoolmates, "and passed us rapidly in his studies. He lost no time at home, and when he was not at work was at his books. He kept up his studies on Sunday, and carried his books with him to work, so that he might read when he rested from labor." "I induced my husband to permit Abe to read and study at home as well as at school," writes his stepmother. "At first he was not easily reconciled to it, but finally he too seemed willing to encourage him to a certain extent. Abe was a dutiful son to me always, and we took particular care when he was reading not to disturb him—would let him read on and on until he quit of his own accord."

<sup>1</sup> This article will be found in *The Library of the World's Best Literature*, edited by Mr. Charles Dudley Warner, Mr. Mabie, Mrs. L. G. Runkle, and Mr. George H. Warner, and published by Messrs. R. S. Peale and J. A. Hill (93 Fifth Ave., N. Y. City). 30 vols. Copy-right, 1898.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN

From a photograph by Brady taken about 1864.

The books within his reach were few, but they were among the best. First and foremost was that collection of great literature in prose and verse, the Bible: a library of sixty-six volumes, presenting nearly every literary form, and translated at the fortunate moment when the English language had received the recent impress of its greatest masters of the speech of the imagination. This literature Mr. Lincoln knew intimately, familiarly, fruitfully; as Shakespeare knew it in an earlier version, and as Tennyson knew it and was deeply influenced by it in the form in which it entered into and trained Lincoln's imagination. Then there was that wise and very human text-book of the knowledge of character and life, "*Æsop's Fables*;" that masterpiece of clear presentation, "*Robinson Crusoe*;" and that classic of pure English, "*The Pilgrim's Progress*." These four books—in the hands of a meditative boy, who read until the last ember went out on the hearth, began again when the earliest light reached his bed in the loft of the log cabin, and perched himself on a stump, book in hand, at the end of every furrow in the plowing season—contained the elements of a movable university.

To these must be added many volumes borrowed from more fortunate neighbors; for he had "read through every book he had heard of in that country, for a circuit of fifty miles." A history of the United States and a copy of Weems's "*Life of Washington*" laid the foundations of his political education. That he read with his imagination as well as with his eyes is clear from certain words spoken in the Senate chamber at Trenton in 1861. "May I be pardoned," said Mr. Lincoln, "if on this occasion I mention that way back in my childhood, the earliest days of my being able to read, I got hold of a small book, such a one as few of the members have ever seen—Weems's '*Life of Washington*.' I remember all the accounts there given of the battle-fields and struggles for the liberties of the country; and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton, New Jersey. The crossing of the river, the contest with the Hessians, the great hardships endured at that time—all fixed themselves on my memory more than any single Revolutionary event; and you all know, for you have all been boys, how those early impressions last longer than any others."

"When Abe and I returned to the house from work," writes John Hanks, "he would

go to the cupboard, snatch a piece of corn bread, sit down, take a book, cock his legs up as high as his head, and read. We grubbed, plowed, weeded, and worked together barefooted in the field. Whenever Abe had a chance in the field while at work, or at the house, he would stop and read." And this habit was kept up until Mr. Lincoln had found both his life-work and his individual expression. Later he devoured Shakespeare and Burns; and the poetry of these masters of the dramatic and lyric form, sprung like himself from the common soil, and like him self-trained and directed, furnished a kind of running accompaniment to his work and his play. What he read he not only held tenaciously, but took into his imagination and incorporated into himself. His familiar talk was enriched with frequent and striking illustrations from the Bible and from "*Æsop's Fables*."

This passion for knowledge and for companionship with the great writers would have gone for nothing, so far as the boy's training in expression was concerned, if he had contented himself with acquisition; but he turned everything to account. He was as eager for expression as for the material of expression; more eager to write and to talk than to read. Bits of paper, stray sheets, even boards, served his purpose. He was continually transcribing with his own hand thoughts or phrases which had impressed him. Everything within reach bore evidence of his passion for reading, and for writing as well. The flat sides of logs, the surface of the broad wooden shovel, everything in his vicinity which could receive a legible mark, was covered with his figures and letters. He was studying expression quite as intelligently as he was searching for thought. Years afterward, when asked how he had attained such extraordinary clearness of style, he recalled his early habit of retaining in his memory unfamiliar words or phrases overheard in ordinary conversation or met in books and newspapers, until night, meditating on them until he got at their meaning and then translating them into his own simpler speech. This habit, kept up for years, was the best possible training for the writing of such English as one finds in the Bible and in "*The Pilgrim's Progress*." His self-education in the art of expression soon bore fruit in a local reputation both as a talker and a writer. His facility in rhyme and essay-writing was not only greatly admired by his fellows, but awakened great astonishment,

Address delivered at the dedication of the  
Cemetery at Gettysburg.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers  
brought forth on this continent, a new na-  
tion, conceived in liberty, and dedicated  
to the proposition that all men are cre-  
ated equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war,  
testing whether that nation, or any nation  
so conceived and so dedicated, can long  
endure. We are met on a great battle-field  
of that war. We have come to dedicate a  
portion of that field, as a final resting  
place for those who here gave their lives  
that that nation might live. It is alto-  
gether fitting and proper that we should  
do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedi-

FACSIMILE OF LINCOLN'S GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

From the Life of Lincoln by Mr. Noah Brooks, published by Messrs. G. P. Putnam's Sons in their  
"Heroes of the Nations" series.

cate — we can not consecrate — we can not  
hallow this ground. The brave men, liv-  
ing and dead, who struggled here have con-  
secrated it, far above our poor power to add  
or detract. The world will little note, nor  
long remember what we say here, but it can  
never forget what they did here. It is for us  
the living, rather, to be dedicated here to  
the unfinished work which they who fought  
here have thus far so nobly advanced.  
It is rather for us to be here dedicated, to  
the great task remaining before us — that  
from these honored dead we take increased  
devotion to that cause for which they gave  
the last full measure of devotion — that  
we here highly resolve that these dead shall  
not have died in vain — that this nation,  
under God, shall have a new birth of free-  
dom — and that government of the people,  
by the people, for the people, shall not per-  
ish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln.

November 19, 1863.

because these arts were not taught in the neighboring schools.

In speech, too, he was already disclosing that command of the primary and universal elements of interest in human intercourse which was to make him, later, one of the most entertaining men of his time. His power of analyzing a subject so as to be able to present it to others with complete clearness was already disclosing itself. No matter how complex a question might be, he did not rest until he had reduced it to its simplest terms. When he had done this, he was not only eager to make it clear to others, but to give his presentation freshness, variety, attractiveness. He had, in a word, the literary sense. "When he appeared in company," writes one of his early companions, "the boys would gather and cluster round him to hear him talk. Mr. Lincoln was figurative in his speech, talks, and conversation. He argued much from analogy, and explained things hard for us to understand by stories, maxims, tales, and figures. He would almost always point his lesson or idea by some story that was plain and near to us, that we might instantly see the force and bearing of what he said."

In that phrase lies the secret of the closeness of Mr. Lincoln's words to his theme and to his listeners—one of the qualities of genuine, original expression. He fed himself with thought, and he trained himself in expression; but his supreme interest was in the men and women about him, and, later, in the great questions which agitated them. He was in his early manhood when society was profoundly moved by searching questions which could neither be silenced nor evaded; and his lot was cast in a section where, as a rule, people read little and talked much. Public speech was the chief instrumentality of political education and the most potent means of persuasion; but behind the platform, upon which Mr. Lincoln was to become a commanding figure, were countless private debates carried on at street corners, in hotel rooms, by the country road, in every place where men met even in the most casual way. In these wayside schools Mr. Lincoln practiced the art of putting things until he became a past-master in debate, both formal and informal.

If all these circumstances, habits, and conditions are studied in their entirety, it will be seen that Mr. Lincoln's style, so far as its formal qualities are concerned, is in no sense

accidental or even surprising. He was all his early life in the way of doing precisely what he did with a skill which had become instinct in his later life. He was educated, in a very unusual way, to speak for his time and to his time with perfect sincerity and simplicity; to feel the moral bearing of the questions which were before the country; to discern the principles involved; and to so apply the principles to the questions as to clarify, illuminate, and persuade. There is little difficulty in accounting for the lucidity, simplicity, flexibility, and compass of Mr. Lincoln's style; it is not until we turn to its temperamental and spiritual qualities, to the soul of it, that we find ourselves perplexed and baffled.

But Mr. Lincoln's possession of certain rare qualities is in no way more surprising than their possession by Shakespeare, Burns, and Whitman. We are constantly tempted to look for the sources of a man's power in his educational opportunities instead of in his temperament and inheritance. The springs of genius are purified and directed in their flow by the processes of training, but they are fed from deeper sources. The man of obscure ancestry and rude surroundings is often in closer touch with nature, and with those universal experiences which are the very stuff of literature, than the man who is born on the upper reaches of social position and opportunity. Mr. Lincoln's ancestry for at least two generations were pioneers and frontiersmen, who knew hardship and privation, and were immersed in that great wave of energy and life which fertilized and humanized the central West. They were in touch with those original experiences out of which the higher evolution of civilization slowly rises; they knew the soil and the sky at first hand; they wrested a meager subsistence out of the stubborn earth by constant toil; they shared to the full the vicissitudes and weariness of humanity at its elemental tasks.

It was to this nearness to the heart of a new country, perhaps, that Mr. Lincoln owed his intimate knowledge of his people, and his deep and beautiful sympathy with them. There was nothing sinuous or secondary in his processes of thought: they were broad, simple, and homely in the old sense of the word. He had rare gifts, but he was rooted deep in the soil of the life about him, and so completely in touch with it that he divined its secrets and used its speech. This vital sympathy gave his nature a deep and beau-

tiful gentleness, and suffused his thought with a tenderness born of deep compassion and love. He carried the sorrows of his country as truly as he bore its burdens; and when he came to speak on the second immortal day at Gettysburg, he condensed in a few sentences the innermost meaning of the struggle and the victory in the life of the Nation. It was this deep heart of pity and love in him which carried him far beyond the reaches of statesmanship or oratory, and gave his words that finality of expression which marks the noblest art.

That there was a deep vein of poetry in Mr. Lincoln's nature is clear to one who reads the story of his early life; and this innate idealism, set in surroundings so harsh and rude, had something to do with his melancholy. The sadness which was mixed with his whole life was, however, largely due to his temperament; in which the final tragedy seemed always to be predicted. In that temperament, too, is hidden the secret of the

rare quality of nature and mind which suffused his public speech and turned so much of it into literature. There was humor in that speech, there was deep human sympathy, there was clear mastery of words for the use to which he put them; but there was something deeper and more pervasive—there was the quality of his temperament; and temperament is a large part of genius. The inner forces of his nature played through his thought; and when great occasions touched him to the quick, his whole nature shaped his speech and gave it clear intelligence, deep feeling, and that beauty which is distilled out of the depths of the sorrows and hopes of the world. He was as unlike Burke and Webster, those masters of the eloquence of statesmanship, as Burns was unlike Milton and Tennyson. Like Burns, he held the key of the life of his people; and through him, as through Burns, that life found a voice, vibrating, pathetic, and beautiful beyond most voices of his time.

## Lincoln and Darwin

Born February 12, 1809

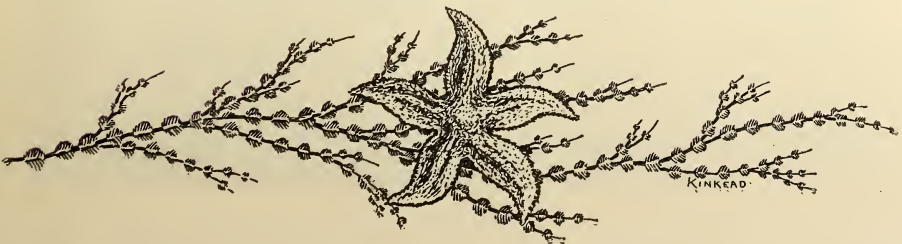
By Frederick LeRoy Sargent

Emancipators both, Time's twins who taught  
The world twin truths long kept from mortal ken:  
What *freedom* means at last to freeborn men,  
And what the *progress* which our fathers sought.

Hope's prophets were they, led by fearless thought:  
Life wrote her primal law with Darwin's pen,  
While Lincoln's word raised man from brute again,  
Through love undoing what love's foes had wrought.

Iconoclasts they were, who won from creeds  
That knew not progress, and abhorred the light,  
Curses which honor; yet, o'er fanes outworn,

A nobler temple fit for noblest needs  
They built, wherein the ages will unite  
In blessings on the day when both were born!





EMERSON'S HOUSE AT CONCORD  
Photographed by Mr. A. E. Alden, of Boston



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